

A Tremendous change at Cray, Woodland Creation along Cray Gill in Upper Wharfedale

If you take a walk or drive up to the top of Kidstones Pass you'll be able to see a new woodland creation project the National Trust has completed in Upper Wharfedale, planting 1500 trees at Cray in a recently fenced 300 metre section of Cray Gill. The gill runs along the edge of a grazed pasture with several large veteran ash trees; magnificent hollow trees just about clinging to life but succumbing to ash die back. Apart from one or two hawthorns that's about it from a tree perspective. Grazing by livestock has prevented seedlings from regenerating and creating another generation of trees, leading to the typical open Dales landscape of grassland, with one or two mature trees growing here and there.

But why's this a problem? The Dales is a lovely landscape, already "home to nationally and internationally important landscapes and wildlife" according to the Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority. Compared to many parts of the National Park, Wharfedale is relatively well wooded, with areas of upland ash woodlands on the steeper fellsides, a Priority Habitat in themselves. Apart from the effects of ash dieback, many of these are quite "healthy". We've several gill woodlands, growing in the mossy, damp confines of the steeper ravines, gullies and tributary valleys; mini rainforests running down the fellsides. And the NT have planted several hundred metres of hedgerow, which in themselves create long narrow woodlands. But I think a good, and totally unscientific, way to get an idea of the low woodland cover we have in Wharfedale (and elsewhere) is to hover over it in Google Earth (other satellite views are available), which brings the lack of trees to light in a really graphic way. What on the ground feels like a dense woodland, from the air looks very sparse.

Recently we've produced Woodland Opportunity Maps, highlighting areas where the potential for new woodland is greatest. Using this and being opportunistic with a tenancy coming to an end, we agreed to taking 1.5 hectares out of agricultural production to enable the work to take place. The Yorkshire Dales Millennium Trust provided us with 30% of the funding, while Wharfedale Naturalists also helped with a generous donation of £1000. The Woodland Trust provided trees free of charge. We planted 500 of the trees in protective tubes made from cotton and pine resin; the rest planted with no protection.

The UK Forestry Standard applies to new woodlands. These can be summed up somewhat simply in the phrase "*right tree, right place, right reason*". To ensure we met this standard we needed to get an Opinion on whether we needed a full Environmental Impact assessment (EIA) for the site. The types of thing considered are whether the new woodland will have a potentially detrimental impact on surrounding habitats, or species. The presence of ground nesting birds, curlew in particular, might prevent, or alter, the creation of new woodland. Historic landscape is also looked at. Fortunately, we didn't need the full EIA as this would have extended the planning time considerably.

This week we got the last of the trees planted, with a mix of staff and volunteers helping. Now that the trees are all in, it's possible to imagine this site in 30 years, adding to the mosaic of habitats running through Cray, preventing erosion of the gill bank and connecting other areas of woodland and trees together. But it's only a beginning. In future the trees will provide an additional seed source that with sustainable livestock numbers will enable trees to grow more widely in the surrounding landscape, helping with our property objective of having a landscape with more trees.

The National Trust has a strategic objective to “*establish 20m trees by 2030 to contribute to carbon sequestration and to create and restore brilliant places for wildlife that also deliver great experiences for people*”. If you would like any further information, or think you might like to help with tree planting here in Wharfedale in the future, please feel free to contact me on

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